

Mickey Dwyer to celebrate 100th Christmas

by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

Marguerite Dwyer was busy baking cookies when I paid her a visit last week. She'd spent the day before blowing leaves off her driveway and a few days earlier had decorated her Christmas tree. Seems like minor accomplishments until they're put into perspective.

Dwyer, known to most as Mickey, will celebrate her 100th Christmas this week. Coincidentally, December 25 will be her 100th birthday and the night before, on Christmas Eve, she'll sing a solo of "O Holy Night" at Bethel United Methodist Church in Lively, just as she's done many times before.

Remarkable doesn't begin to describe Mickey, whose only real ailments are arthritis and macular degeneration. She lives independently, still planting, weeding—with a small rototiller—harvesting a vegetable garden and doing yard work, including maintaining flower beds

Everybody has a Story

and removing leaves with an electric blower.

As part of the Greatest Generation, Mickey has led an exceptional life. She downplays it, but get her talking and she'll amaze you with the stories of all she's seen and done in her 100 years.

Her life

Mickey came into the world prematurely on a cold December 25, 1922, in New Hampshire. She was born at her grandmother's house, delivered by a doctor who arrived by horse and buggy from a nearby town.

Weighing 4.5 pounds, she said her parents "got me as a Christmas gift two months early."

Although Mickey has never had any children, she helped raise five as the oldest of six siblings. Her father died when he was only 35. Her mother was expecting the couples'

sixth child at the time.

"I don't think either one of them even knew she was pregnant," said Mickey.

Her father passed on Memorial Day after Mickey said he became ill following a 1936 flood in New Hampshire. Her youngest sister was born on New Year's Eve.

In some ways, her own life mimicked her mother's. A young Mickey married H. Shirley Dwyer, a New York dentist, in 1947. An author and highly acclaimed in his field, Dwyer was a pioneer of fluoridation and set up dental programs in New York before becoming the state dental director in Arkansas in 1953. Mickey had worked for Dwyer before they were married. A few years her senior, he passed away at the age of 58,

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Mickey Dwyer of Mollusk places a trinket on her Christmas tree, which includes ornaments she has collected from all over the world during her career in the foreign service. Dwyer will turn 100 years old on Christmas Day. Photo by Lisa Hinton-Valdrighi

100th birthday on Christmas Day

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11 years into their marriage. Mickey was 33, a young widow and the same age as her mother when her father passed away.

But unlike her mother, she never remarried in all these years.

"I've been engaged a couple of times but backed out. They were good men, but they weren't my husband," said Mickey. "I'd rather have a few years of a good marriage than 25 years of a bad one."

She says she never regretted not marrying again and instead chose what most would call a life of adventure.

"I spent 26 years wandering around the world."

Her career

If it was a major world event, Mickey was probably there or nearby.

She was in Vietnam during both the Tet Offensive and the Fall of Saigon and in Moscow during the Cold War.

Following her husband's death, she worked for an orthodontist, planning his travel itineraries and working on his campaign for president of the American Dental Association.

"Then I decided to look for something else and I was at a post office in Little Rock [Arkansas] and saw a brochure about the Foreign Service," said Mickey. "I wrote to Washington to find out about it."

After passing the admissions test, she got a call from DC, was accepted into the U.S. Foreign Service as a staff officer and requested to be sent to the Philippines or Bolivia. A week later, she received her orders and was off to Laos.

"And that post is the reason I'm here in Lancaster today," said Mickey.

While in Laos, she met defense attache Don Smart, father of Bob and Neil Smart.

"We stayed in touch and Don sold me the land my house is on today," said Mickey, who retired to Mollusk in 1988.

She spent over a quarter of a century working all over the world with stints of two or three years abroad interspersed with a few months or a year stateside.

From Laos, she went to Taiwan and Germany before volunteering to go to Saigon, where she spent three-and-a-half years. She was there in 1968 during the Tet Offensive, the largest military campaign of the Vietnam War.

"I loved it there, even though it wasn't very safe," she said.



Marguerite "Mickey" Dwyer in the 1950s. She will celebrate her 100th birthday this week.

"Of course during the Tet Offensive, they were shooting at the embassy and bombing the city. I lived in a three-story apartment building and when they started rocketing the city, there was nowhere to go. We had to go outdoors to get to the basement."

Although the city was on a 24-hour curfew, Mickey had to get to her office at the embassy, where she performed clerical and administrative services.

"I had to go to work, so the men sent an armored vehicle to pick me up. The Vietcong had taken over. They picked up the ambassador's secretary and me in an armored car and we rode with an armored blanket over us."

During another battle in Saigon, "they started bombing the city," she said. "In my second floor apartment, we had metal shutters on our balconies we could close at night. One morning at about 5 o'clock or so, all of a sudden a rocket landed diagonally across the street and broke all of the windows in our building," she said.

"I was up early thinking about making the boys a batch of cookies," said Mickey, referring to the security officers and guards.

When the bomb hit, "I rolled immediately off the bed and pulled the mattress over me and waited for another but it didn't come. That's when I was thinking, why did you come back for a second tour?"

"When the rocket whistled you knew it was going over," she said. "It was the ones that didn't whistle you worried about. They were landing close."

Following her tour in Saigon, Mickey went to Germany, where she traveled Europe's countryside on the weekends.

She spent time in Africa, working in about 15 countries where she went to parties where

they roasted goats and danced with venomous snakes. "You just never knew what you were going to be doing. It was wonderful."

She also worked in Moscow during key periods of the Cold War.

"The tourists they liked, the diplomats they didn't," she said. "But the diplomats were safe. They wouldn't let anything happen to them or us. I felt safe but I didn't like it there."

"I grew up in New Hampshire but nothing compared to 'Moscow cold.' During a Christmas holiday, I had a break and there was a bread store near my apartment building. I thought I'd walk down there and stepped out and said 'Lordy, it's cold.' Later I found out it was 20 degrees below zero," she said.

She served as a rover in Rome and all over Europe before retiring with 26 years in the Foreign Service in 1986. She came out of retirement briefly when she went to Budapest for a limited appointment with the ambassador.

Highly respected as an assistant, she was often "requested" by state officials.

Retirement

Mickey became involved in church and civic organizations as soon as she moved to Lancaster County, joining Bethel Church and its choir. A talented singer, Mickey has taken voice lessons all over the world.

She is a past member of the Lancaster Players and was very active at the Center for the Arts, serving on its board and performing in every show the center produced. She also belonged to the Rappahannock Music Study Club and the Five Rivers Fiber Guild.

Her limited eyesight and arthritis now keep her from doing some of the things she loves.

"I can't sew, read, knit or do my crafts. But if I know the words to the songs, I can still sing," she said.

Her Christmas tree is adorned with ornaments from Germany, Hungary, Poland, Taiwan, Norway, New Zealand, Africa and Australia. Her walls are decorated with framed Chinese scrolls she painted in Taiwan. There's a beautiful bird sculpture, a present from an ambassador when she retired, and knickknacks collected from all over the world—all memories of a life well lived.